

LAOS

following a crowd. It was about two miles from the town's centre 527 and I passed several pagodas on the way, where carpenters were working by lamplight in preparation for a future festival.

An enclosure had been built round the pagoda in which every 354 kind of light, from hurricane lamps to fluorescent tubes, had been 527 concentrated in an anarchic glare. The pagoda had hired a generator 545 for the occasion. There was no entrance fee, but young ladies with demurely lowered eyes waited just inside to accept donations, in return for which you received a candle, a posy of Japanese lilac and two joss-sticks in a bamböö container. Among the many attractions was a free theatre show, lasting for many hours, indistinguishable, except to an expert, from the theatre of Siam. Actors remained on the stage for what seemed interminable periods, occasionally advancing or retreating a few steps. Meanwhile their babies played happily round their feet, and quite frequently a stage-hand would walk across and interrupt a scene for a few seconds to pump up the pressure in the hurricane lamps.

On a nearby platform the *lap ton* was being danced. Once again 292 it was the major attraction, but as it was still incorrect for Laotian 301 girls to dance in public, religious enterprise had arranged for 535 hostesses to be brought over from Siam, just across the river. The 562 pagoda hired the girls for the three nights and lodged them in a 527 nearby building. It cost a piastre to cavort round the stage for about fifteen minutes with one of them. They were dressed in hideous knee-length frocks, and some seemed to have permanent waves. The backward Laotian girls in their dowdy finery, their silk scarves, their skirts woven at the hem and waist-band with silver and gold thread, and their abundant jewel-decked chignons, could only look on wistfully. As I arrived the organizers were having 403 trouble with the microphone — indispensable adjunct to any social 527 occasion in the new Far East. A young man chanted a soft, nasal melody which could only be heard within the *boun* enclosure itself. But suddenly the electricians were successful with their tinkering and all Vientiane was flooded with a great, ogriish baying. The

A DRAGON APPARENT

403 electricians hugged each other, and, enchanted by the din, the
527 audience began to drift away from the theatre and make for the
dancing floor.

527 The second attraction in order of popularity was a love-court. A
584 quadrangular arrangement of tables had been formed, covered by a
782 thatched roof raised on posts decorated with woven bamboo
793 representations of animals, weapons and phallic emblems. Seated
round the tables in the interior of the square were the girls, and
their suitors sat facing them. Between the couples had been placed
offerings of food, brought by the girls. Originally a tribute to some
ancient, forgotten fertility god, a primeval Thai Venus, the offer-
ings would be given, next day, to the bonzes. All through the night
the bantering of witticisms, the singing and the exchange of
improvised verse would go on, accompanied by the accordion-like
[534] wheezings of the Kène, the Stone Age gourd pipes of Laos. Some-
times through a happy fault in the circuit the splutter and bellow of
the loud-speakers would suddenly lapse, and you heard the bee-
hive dronings of the communal love-making, the kènes, and the
voice of the presiding bonze, preaching continually in an archaic,
incomprehensible language from the wicker cage into which he
had been fastened. The cage symbolized the protection of his
religion from these earthly distractions. As soon as inspiration
failed he would be relieved by the next on the rota of preachers,
waiting now to take his place.

584 Love-courts are the accepted preliminary to the consummation of
[533] affairs of the heart, which—despite European conviction that
576 romantic love is a Western invention—are accompanied in Laos
by much versifying and mild, self-imposed frustrations. When, for
instance, a well-known beauty is wooed by a number of suitors, a
serenading match may be arranged on the veranda of her house to
permit her to test under competitive conditions the poetic and
musical capabilities of each of them. Complete pre-marital freedom
[836] is recognized, but much outward reserve is maintained. There is a
time and place for everything. It is incorrect, for example, to